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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the nature of teacher leadership as it was perceived by 12 inservice elementary school teachers. Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the teachers. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Results indicated that half of the respondents were unfamiliar with the term teacher leadership. Among those who were not, some were hesitant to express their perceptions because they were not cognizant of any textbook definition. Multiple perceptions of teacher leadership emerged and were organized into four categories: professional development (including mentoring new teachers and committee membership); great teaching (as measured by continuing education and empowering students); taking a stand for what one believes in; and circumstances that have the potential to act as facilitators for or hindrances to teacher leadership (teaching experience, lack of time, and teacher leader versus principal). (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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# Perceptions of Teacher Leadership:

## A Case Study of Inservice Elementary School Teachers

**Keith J. Suranna**
**David M. Moss**

**University of Connecticut**
**Neag School of Education**
**Department of Curriculum and Instruction**
**249 Glenbrook Road, U-33**
**Storrs, CT 06269-2033**
**Telephone: (860) 486-0249**
**Facsimile: (860) 486-0210**

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## Introduction

Teacher empowerment remains a major key to educational reform in the United States (Holmes Group, 1986, 1990, 1995; Sarason, 1982) and yet, as we enter the new millennium, among the many practical difficulties faced by teachers are a lack of substantial decision-making power in their profession (Andrew, 1974; Hallinger & Richardson, 1988) and an overwhelming feeling of being controlled and dominated (Apple, 1982; Irwin, 1996). Teacher leadership is a concept that entails empowering classroom teachers, those directly involved in the educative process, to play vital roles in what actually occurs in schools. Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) write, "Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond their classrooms, influence others toward improved educational practice, and identify with and contribute to a community of teacher leaders" (p. 6). The earlier this notion is cultivated within the population of educators, the more likely it is that a meaningful shift in the power-base of formal schooling can occur.

This qualitative study examined the nature of teacher leadership as it was perceived by 12 inservice elementary school teachers. If teachers are to serve as change agents within the context of school reform, they need to exhibit leadership characteristics across a broad range of areas. Understanding inservice teachers' perceptions of teacher leadership can provide insight into the extent to which teacher leadership is currently manifested in practice.

## Overview of Teacher Leadership

Although the body of research on teacher leadership is growing, it remains modest (Cuban, 1988; Wasley, 1991). Andrew (1974) provides a model definition of the concept by stating, "Teacher leadership is not meant to refer to administrative or bureaucratic leadership; rather to a central role for teachers in promoting change which improves the quality of education" (p. 8). He offers three areas in which teachers might

exert leadership and, hence, prove catalysts for change: (a) self-improvement, (b) improvement of colleagues, and (c) initiation of curriculum change. Andrew proposes that the teacher leader serves as a bridge between the school and university, as well as theory and practice. "The teacher leader is...a master teacher and curriculum leader, devoting talents to stimulating planning and implementation of curricular change" (Andrew, 1974, p. 66).

In their study "Teacher Leadership: Tensions and Ambiguities in Organizational Perspective," Smylie and Denny (1990) discuss a metropolitan K-8 school district that had implemented thirteen new teacher leadership positions. In interviews with the teacher leaders, the authors focus on three general research questions: (a) How did the teacher leaders define and perform their new leadership roles? (b) What factors did the teachers believe influenced the development and performance of their roles? and (c) How did other teachers perceive and respond to these leadership roles and their performance?

Smylie and Denny (1990) uncovered remarkable consistencies regarding how the teacher leaders defined their roles. The teacher leaders viewed themselves primarily as advocates for fellow teachers within their buildings. They expressed considerable agreement that words and phrases such as "facilitator," "helper," "catalyst for improvement," "emotional support," and "source of knowledge" are accurate descriptors of their roles. The researchers also identified approximately "three dozen" leadership activities in which teacher leaders had engaged. Some of these activities were attending program-related meetings, engaging in building-level decision making, developing district-level curricular programs, developing curricular/instructional material, planning building-level staff development activities, and promoting implementation of district-level programs. According to Smylie and Denny, uncertainties were found regarding "...whether their fellow teachers understood their leadership roles and what those teachers and their principals expected of them in those roles" (p. 246). Because the

teacher leaders were expected to continue their classroom teaching, they reported that the greatest concern involved in their roles remained the allocation of time between classroom and leadership responsibilities.

From their surveys of colleagues of the teacher leaders, Smylie and Denny (1990) found that most responded positively to the teacher leaders. The researchers report that although relatively few respondents identified one-on-one interactions with the teacher leaders, teachers did work with them in professional workshops, curriculum committees, and in the development of curricular and instructional material. Regarding the value of the teacher leaders the faculty " ... identified more benefits for their buildings, for the district, and for teachers generally than for themselves as individuals" (p. 249). However, a number of classroom teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of personalized assistance from the teacher leaders. The researchers conclude that the definition and performance of teacher leadership roles "may be influenced substantially by the organizational contexts in which they are established" (p. 256).

One of the few in-depth descriptive studies of teacher leaders in action remains Wasley's (1991) Teachers Who Lead: The Rhetoric of Reform and The Realities of Practice. Choosing to do case studies on three teachers from different National Education Association states in the US, Wasley spent two weeks observing and interviewing each teacher. Her guiding research question was, "What is the nature of teacher leadership as it currently exists in schools today?" Wasley also conducted interviews with three to four colleagues of each teacher leader to uncover their conceptions of the role teacher leader. In addition to conducting interviews, Wasley observed each teacher leader in the classroom and attended evening meetings. She also visited several classrooms of teachers who were to be the recipients of the teacher leaders' assistance.

As Smylie and Denny (1990) reported, Wasley (1991) found that one of the major issues was in defining teacher leadership. She reports that upon asking teachers and

administrators to define the term, she received a great deal of confusion and, at best, vague answers. She writes, "Everyone in the educational community had a different interpretation of the teacher leader's role, the purpose, and how the time allocated should be spent" (p. 138). Wasley notes that the teacher leaders themselves found it difficult to define their roles "...because it has never been possible and/or meaningful to spend time talking about it" (p. 147). Because of the traditional lack of differentiated roles among teachers, many felt uncomfortable with the idea that the concept of teacher leadership challenged the egalitarian norms that have so long been established.

Another major finding was that all three teacher leaders expressed concern that communication between them and other teachers regarding the nature of their work was "limited and haphazard." Wasley (1991) also found that, as a result of their positions, the teacher leaders felt more isolated and lonely than when they served solely as classroom teachers. She notes the existence of ambiguities regarding whether teacher leaders should also serve as classroom teachers. Although the teacher leaders believed their leadership responsibilities augmented their classroom work, their students sometimes resented the fact that they were often out of the classroom.

Despite the many problems and paradoxes involved in teacher leadership, there remains encouraging possibilities. Wasley (1991) notes, "I am both heartened by the potential for teacher leadership, and respectful of the complexity involved in any attempt to create stronger leadership roles for teachers" (p. 168). There is enough evidence to suggest that through the concept of teacher leadership, the many problems that plague the teaching profession can be addressed and, perhaps, eradicated. It is with these possibilities in mind that this current study was undertaken.

## Statement of the Problem

A review of the literature places emphasis on the importance of teacher

leadership in serving our nation's schools. This call for teacher leadership "is fueled by important and conclusive research conducted over the last 20 years that demonstrates that teachers, too long silent and isolated in classrooms, must take more leadership in the restructuring of public education" (Wasley, 1991, p. 5). To date, case study descriptions of educational contexts are only beginning to explore this vital issue in education.

The problem that was addressed in this study is the need to define and describe the nature of teacher leadership as it is perceived by inservice elementary school teachers. If the results of this study are considered in future research, divergent definitions of teacher leadership that have been found (Smylie & Denny, 1990; Wasley, 1991) may become more in accord and evolve toward a common understanding.

## Research Methodology

In this study, multiple case studies were intentionally used to examine the nature of teacher leadership. Participants were selected based on their ability to aid in the generation of theory and the data in which theory is grounded. Due to the nature of this study, purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to select individuals from the target population.

It has been found that first-year teachers tend not to take part in leadership positions (Baker & Andrew, 1993), therefore a sample of 12 inservice elementary school teachers, currently serving in grades K-6, who have been teaching for at least three years were selected as participants. It was expected that as a result of this minimum three years of professional experience, the identified inservice teachers would have had opportunities to exhibit qualities of teacher leadership (M. D. Andrew, personal communication, April 9, 1999).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was carried out via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the

12 participants. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and all were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim following each meeting. Throughout the interviews, participants' responses continually provided rich information that enabled the construction of possible categories, and instilled in the researchers a deeper understanding of the perceptions of teacher leadership.

In this study, data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The coding in this study was a two-step process. In the first step, data obtained from transcripts of interviews were initially sorted to be compared and contrasted in order to conceptualize and create categories regarding the nature of teacher leadership. Segments of data (words, sentences, phrases, and paragraphs) that particularly corresponded to perceptions of teacher leadership were highlighted and tagged. Beside the selected segments, emerging categories and labels were written. For example, "professional development" emerged as a category of perceptions of teacher leadership which was highlighted throughout the data. Notes pertaining to the particular characteristics of perceptions of teacher leadership were written beside the highlighted segments.

In the second step, during extensive review of the emerging categories, the researchers compared and contrasted the categories in search of relationships and differences among them. Once connections between categories were determined, some were clustered into subcategories and assigned parallel color codes. The researchers paid particular attention to perceptions that stood out and/or regularly occurred throughout the data. For example, "mentoring new teachers" emerged as a prevalent subcategory under the initial category of "professional development."

The reliability of this two-step coding was checked by comparing categories and subcategories by two different coders (Bishop & Anderson, 1990). Any discrepancies in the coding or interpretation was discussed until an agreement was reached. In the

extremely few instances in which complete agreement was not reached, the passages in the transcripts were discarded.

## Results

Approximately half of the participants in this study were unfamiliar with the term teacher leadership. Among those who were not, some were hesitant to express their perceptions because they were not cognizant of any "textbook definition." The researchers needed to assure them that the study was interested in their personal views. After this, they appeared more comfortable in articulating their own perceptions. Multiple perceptions of teacher leadership emerged from data analysis, and were organized into four broad categories: "Professional Development," "Great Teaching," "Taking a Stand," and "Facilitators and Hindrances." Although each category is discussed separately, they are interrelated. Taken as a whole, the four categories provide a well-rounded picture of the nature of teacher leadership as it was perceived by the participants.

### Professional Development

The majority of the participants discussed the teacher leader as one who has "big picture concerns" and serves outside the classroom to benefit the entire life of the school. Most of the participants also believed that by parlaying experience, wisdom, and collegiality outside the classroom, the teacher leader's impact on the professional development of others and themselves can be far reaching. His or her efforts ultimately were thought to benefit students. "A teacher leader is someone who can take his or her qualities, and share them with other teachers for the good of the students," explained one participant.

Many participants emphasized the fact that serving outside the classroom is not an easy task. Teachers are under tremendous strain and very often have little time to

devote to this practice. One participant commented, "Getting ready to begin a family, I'm not in a position to devote weekends to attend or present at workshops." This was not an uncommon sentiment. However, participants expressed the idea that not every teacher must do everything. Some participants discussed the idea of "taking turns" in leadership positions.

In this study, participants described ways in which teacher leaders could "share leadership" to serve the professional development of their schools, colleagues, and themselves, without taking necessary time away from their students. Two significant ways were addressed through which teacher leaders could share leadership: mentoring new teachers and committee membership.

***Mentoring New Teachers***

The aspect of teacher leadership most identified was serving as mentor and role model for the development of new teachers. Many participants spoke of being mentored by teacher leaders who modeled exemplary practice. Some participants considered themselves teacher leaders because they assisted in the practice of neophyte teachers. One participant said, "I have all these notes from brand new teachers in other schools in the district wanting to come to my classroom to visit and observe." Although another participant had only taught second grade for two years, she was able to mentor new teachers at that grade level. Through working with beginning teachers, teacher leaders play a major role in facilitating the development of quality classroom practitioners.

***Committee Membership***

"Teachers are a tremendous resource that very often go untapped," said a participant. In this study, a major characteristic of the role of teacher leader that emerged was serving as resources on school and district-wide committees. The majority of the participants believed similar to assisting new teachers, the teacher leader is one who shares his or her passion and expertise to benefit the school, the district, other

teachers, and his or her own professional development.

In addition, participants expressed the idea that while not always thought of as the one "in charge" of committees and other professional development endeavors, the teacher leader is the one willing to take part and "have a stake" in the improvement of the teaching profession. A participant explained, "I think the way to (professional development involvement), is to assess what you're good at and identify places where you would like to see change and then go from there." For example, a school in which one participant taught, was organized into "cadres." In this school, teachers assessed issues they would like to address during the school year, and developed cadres of teachers to focus on those areas. Those teachers interested in improving student motivation, developed a "motivation cadre," and those teachers who were interested in addressing home/school relations, developed a "home-school cadre." In the instance of another participant, her principal had asked her to be on a curriculum committee because she had particular expertise and insight into curriculum.

In this study, teacher leaders seemed to have been able to work on the improvement of specific areas in which they would like to see change and/or have a particular expertise. Most of the participants addressed the fact that the first step which must be taken is on the part of the teachers themselves. An appropriate analogy of teachers being proactive was offered by a participant: "Before you put the fish in the water, the fish need to have a say, but not just a say. The leadership must come from within the water."

**Great Teaching**

A significant characteristic of teacher leadership that emerged from this study was the demonstration of exemplary skills and techniques in the classroom. In addition, it was expressed by the majority of the participants that in order for teacher leaders to serve outside the classroom, especially in gaining allies among colleagues, they must be

outstanding teachers. A common sentiment shared by the teachers was articulated by one participants: "Teacher leaders need to be good teachers because I don't know who'd be following them if they weren't." It was thought that teachers must not only know their craft but be personally invested in it. Another participant discussed the teacher's job as that of a "spiritually developed" vocation, and said, "Teacher leaders have a very strong sense of meaning with their jobs. It's not just a job. If they weren't being paid for it, they'd consider volunteering for it on some level." Two significant concepts were discussed through which great teaching can be measured: continuing education and empowering students.

***Continuing Education***

A significant way discussed through which teacher leaders could become great teachers is via continuing their education. Some participants mentioned that a great many teachers simply halt their education once they have gained the necessary degrees and certification allowing them to teach. However, a teacher leader was believed to be one who is consistently striving to learn more about his or her craft. One participant, a veteran teacher who considered herself a teacher leader said,

> I just finished my sixth-year degree, and I'm still not done. Great teachers need to maintain their education. You need to know what's going on in your field, and what's going on at the state level and national level. You need to maintain standards for yourself as well as for your students. The teaching profession has so much to it, and we need competence in all the different areas.

It was also mentioned that great teaching entails being aware of current research and practice in the teaching field. In this way, the teacher leader was thought to possess the awareness and skills to be able to play a part in educational policy discussions and debates.

***Empowering Students***

Another mark of a great teacher was the idea of empowering students, assisting them to "take control of their own learning." Most participants agreed that a way in which great teachers can do this is through having consistently high expectations for students. A participant said, "Even if a child has heard their whole life that they're a great student, it's important to still tell them what else they can do."

It was also discussed that to set high expectations for students, a safe and supportive learning environment must first be provided. In this study, most participants believed that in order to empower students, teachers must assist students to believe in themselves. "It's important to make students feel that they can be successful and that they are successful and what they think matters," expressed one participant. For example, another participant had developed and implemented a remedial reading program that not only focused on students' academic performance but also their self-esteem. This teacher commented, "What difference does it make if we teach them to read and then they feel miserable about themselves for the rest of their lives? We want those kids to feel good, be emotionally healthy, as well as being able to read."

**Taking a Stand**

A major aspect of the role of teacher leader identified by many participants was described in a number of ways: "taking a stand," "going against the grain," "standing up for what you believe," and "challenging convention." It was discussed that teachers who serve as leaders outside the classroom must be willing and able to express that what they believe is correct for students, teachers, and the field of education. A participant reflected on feeling it was her duty to speak up for what she believed,

> I don't go out of my way to make people upset and I actually try to be very diplomatic. But if it comes down to it and it's got to be said, it's got to be said. It does make me uncomfortable to have someone mad at me. I'll be the first to admit

it. But, that's my job.

As many participants discussed, "top-down management" is prevalent in school districts, but teacher leaders are those who challenge this notion. If, as several participants mentioned, teachers are the most informed individuals of the education process, they are the ones who should have a say in what affects them and their students. Although two participants discussed the fact that not all teachers are willing and/or able to "go against the grain," they could still be considered great teachers in the classroom. However, the majority of the participants in this study spoke of teacher leaders as those who are not willing to simply close their classroom doors and pay no heed to decisions mandated "from above."

**Facilitators and Hindrances**

All of the participants asserted that particular circumstances in which teachers find themselves have the potential to act as either facilitators for or hindrances to teacher leadership. Patterns regarding situations that can assist in the practice of teacher leadership and those that can prevent the practice of teacher leadership, emerged from interviews. Thus, this category is organized into three subcategories which correspond to those facilitators for and hindrances to teacher leadership most revealed in this study: experience, time, and teacher leader vs. principal.

***Experience***

The majority of the participants believed that teacher leaders need to be experienced classroom teachers. Similar to being thought of as skilled practitioners, experience was thought to afford teacher leaders a certain amount of respect among their peers. Although experience as a teacher was believed to facilitate one "to be taken seriously" as a teacher leader, the amount of experience that it would take one to accomplish this was thought by the majority of the participants to be only a few years. It was also believed by many participants of this study that some teachers are "naturals"

and need very little experience to practice teacher leadership.

Some participants discussed the idea that an excessive amount of experience has the potential to hinder teacher leadership. One participant mentioned, "I think the more you see the scarier this profession becomes. I think the more years you're in here, you probably see too much." Thus, a certain amount of experience as a teacher was thought to facilitate one in his or her becoming a teacher leader, but an excessive amount of experience has the potential to impede teacher leadership.

***Time***

Lack of time was identified by the majority of the participants as a major hindrance to teacher leadership. One participant commented,

> There are so many things that I want to do as a leader with my grade level and with the school, and I don't know where to find the time. So, I have these big, huge aspirations and only a few hours worth of time.

Some participants mentioned the fact that time was not always available to address even necessary tasks which involve serving their students or colleagues. Discussing trying to find time to work with her colleagues to create a language arts handbook for third grade students, another participant explained,

> (The activities) help children to think critically, reflect on past experiences, and use different strategies for comprehension. We want to put them all together in a book, and it would literally take us a day to do this. One day, six hours. Where on earth are we going to find that time? We don't want to take more time away from our students.

***Teacher Leader vs. Principal***

Many participants addressed the fact that the collegial relationship between teacher leaders and their principals has the potential to act as either facilitator for or hindrance to teacher leadership. While some of the participants discussed the role of the

principal in its traditional incarnation (i.e., part of the political hierarchy of top-down management), the majority of them spoke of the importance of teacher leaders and principals to work as partners who share the same goals. Several participants explained that principals have greater responsibility for the outcomes of the schools. One participant stated, "The principal really has to worry about what central office wants, test scores, discipline, and issues of hiring and firing. A teacher really doesn't have to worry about that stuff." Furthermore, it was believed that because of his or her "political" position, a principal is more apt to compromise personal values. Another participant explained, "I see a lot of administrators step down from what they believe in because there's a lot of strain on them from the community."

Several participants, however, discussed the importance of principals acting in accord with teacher leaders. Therefore, as the majority of the participants expressed, those principals who view themselves as supporters of the work of teachers, can serve as facilitators to teacher leadership. However, if principals allow themselves to act in hierarchical and bureaucratic ways, and not consider the views and ideas of teachers, they can become a major hindrance to the manifestation of teacher leadership.

## Conclusions and Implications

This research study has addressed the nature of teacher leadership as it was perceived by 12 inservice elementary school teachers. A good sense of the nature of teacher leadership can be gained from their multiple perceptions. Although not all the participants were familiar with the term teacher leadership, all were able to articulate their perceptions of the concept. A teacher leader is thought to be: (a) a great teacher inside the classroom, (b) one who is open to current educational theory and practice, and (c) one who holds students to high expectations while consistently offering them care and support. Teacher leaders are also able to work in partnership with their principals in the

professional development of themselves and their colleagues. Finally, when necessary, the teacher leader must be willing and able to take a stand to insure that the very best of themselves and their colleagues are being implemented for the good of their school and their students.

Serving as teacher educators in a five-year teacher preparation program that claims to produce teacher leaders, the researchers were particularly interested in how the results of this study can impact teacher education and its development of teacher leaders. If empowering teachers does in fact facilitate educational reform, teacher educators may be interested in how inservice teachers perceive teacher leadership. In this way, teacher educators may better understand what direction to take in order to assist in the production of future teacher leaders. The potential for teacher educators to influence reform agendas in public schools, via their preservice teachers, can be far reaching.

As Michael Fullan (1993) reminds us, "Teacher educators like other would-be change agents must take some initiative themselves..." (p. 113). By examining how teacher leadership is perceived by inservice teachers, much can be learned about how teachers either contribute or do not contribute to the reform of their profession, and what teacher educators can do to nurture teacher leadership in their preservice teachers. If true and lasting change is to take place in public schools, the chasm that exists between theory and practice must be bridged. Teacher leadership can be an important starting point in this goal.

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